[Barning Tobacco]

BARNING TOBACCO

Original Names: Changed Names:

Bessie Cassie

John [Holder Archie Marler

Lillie Maria C9 - N.C. b- 41-

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Person interviewed: John Holder (white)

Address: Route #4 Durham, N. C.

Occupation: Tobacco farmer

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Three small boys, two white and the other one colored, were rolling automobile tires down the narrow dusty path. Their clothes were soiled, obviously having not been changed all the week, and it was now Friday. They were too small to be placed at work at the tobacco

“bench” where the other members of the family work five and six days each week, so they usually resort to the tires, their only “playthings” for amusement.

“That's Cassie's little boy,” remarked the larger of the white children as he attempted to explain the presence of the colored child. “He plays with us sometimes while his mama helps my mama.” Then the white child spat tobacco juice. The other two did likewise.

These two white children belong to Archie Marler, a landowner, who plants tobacco for his means of livelihood. They rolled their tires on down the path until they came to the bridge which crosses the stream between the road and their house. Here they stopped, and one of the little boys took from his pocket a deck of playing cards.

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“Want to play a game of something?” he asked. “I play anything, pinocle, blackjack, poker, or anything.”

“Let's play poker,” added the other little boy.

The house was only a short distance from this bridge. Maria, the wife of Archie, was in the kitchen, for it was one of the days on which they didn't have to barn tobacco. The house is old with warped weatherboarding. It has never been painted, and the floor sagged in places. The little boys called to their mother and she appeared at the door, dressed in a neat gingham dress but soiled apron.

“I'm just ashamed for you to see everything in such a mess,” she apologized, “but have a seat if you can find any place to put the chair amongst all these pea hulls scattered all over the floor. We're curing and getting in tobacco all the time, and I have four extra hands to cook for all the time besides the fifteen we have on barning days. But Archie is at the house today, and he has been helping me to shell the butter beans and peas. It takes near 'bout a bushel of each to feed this crowd. I also have to kill 'bout five or six chickens at the time to go 'round for two meals. I always cook my dinner and supper together.”

Maria was now in the room next to the kitchen, a room with two iron beds and the household's only dresser, and its mirror was so nearly covered with flyspecks that one could barely see himself. The two beds also were dingy, but 3 this was due to the fact that children play upon them constantly. The flies were also bad, inside and out.

“I don't know what to do 'bout the children's heads,” Maria remarked. “They've been covered in them sores, and nothing I tried won't do them no good. See how big them scabs are?”

The little boys were in the kitchen pawing over the left-over food. The kitchen was furnished with an old weather-beaten sideboard, a table, a safe, and a wood stove. They eat in the bedroom.

“Some of the boys have fixed them a room upstairs in the pack house,” she continued. “That helps out, too, and they says they like it better 'cause they ain't bothered by the children. My oldest girl is now married and don't live here no more.

“My oldest boy sure is a good one. During all the time that Archie was working at the prison camp guarding prisoners he stayed at home and was man of the house. But I don't know what to do with the rest of them. Them littlest boys will dip snuff in spite of all I can do. I don't know where they got it unless they picked it up from some of the niggers 'round. I just don't have time to stop and whip them.

“There's Archies now if you wanted to ask him anything 'bout tobacco,” she interrupted herself.

Archie was wearing clean khaki pants, a blue shirt, a gray hat, and was barefoot as was his wife.

“I've got in two barns now,” he began, “I'm always glad when I got my barns filled, then I can get out of them 4 clothes and feel a bit cleaner. I'll tell you what's so, when I come out

of them clothes awhile ago them overalls was so full of gum they stood alone 'cause they was so stiff.

“Raising tobacco is sure a nasty job as well as a hard one. If I'd get what my crop this year is worth in dollars and cents I'd never have to hit another lick or work no matter how long I lived, but we folks what makes it don't get nothing much.

“Here's what us tobacco growers have to do to make a crop: We burn out places that we want to sow our seeds along maybe in November. To burn a plant bed means that we burn brush over the spot. That kills out grass seeds and ground insects and leaves ashes that helps to fertilize the ground. Then as soon as we get that bed worked up like we want we sow the seeds. This comes the last of January. We leave the bed then for the seeds to start germinating which is about three or four weeks, then we put canvas on it.

“The seeds start coming up about the last of February, and in a week or so we have to start weeding the bed. We start planting by the last of April into May but plant no later than June. We plow it at least four times and chop it not less than three times.

“Before we can plant it at all we have to work the land by plowing. Then we fertilize deeply in the furrows that are first run for rows. We start working this land for planting almost by the time we start canvassing the plant bed. After it is plowed the second time we start harrowing it until it is soft before we ever cut a furrow with a plow.

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“Almost by the time the plant is set the worms start coming, then there's worming to be done. The grass starts along with the worming which calls for plowing and chopping. We start priming it around July, first or second week, and each field is primed at least five times before it is finally cut. It takes two and a half cords of wood to cure a barn and that has to be cut and split.

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“After we get a barn filled we fire it and get it started to curing at between 80 and 90 degrees and let it stay thereabout until it turns yellow. Then we get the thermometer up to 110 for about eight or ten hours, then increase the fire, stopping when it reaches 120 degrees for three or four hours. After this, we run the heat up to 130 for twenty-five hours, drying the leaf. Then we go up to 170 or 180 to kill it out. It takes four days and four nights to cure one barn. We hardly ever set up, though; we just set a clock to alarm at different times. When it's dried we just let the fire get down and drag the coals out of the flues. Then we keep the dirt floors of the barns wet and keep this up a day and half or two days to get the leaf in order for moving. This softens the leaves so that they don't crack or tear from handling. If the weather is rainy or damp we only open the doors to let the moisture in. When it is ready to move we pack it up in a pile with all the tips turned one way, then we pen it with all the sticks to the outside of the pens so that ventilation might prevent molding.

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“Then it must be graded. It takes three days for one grader to grade a barn and he must have two men to tie it up. There is three grades, or that's the new way of grading. It used to be that there was about six grades. We have a first grade which is yellow—that is the choice. The second grade is ordinary, and the third grade is the remainder that's saved of the crop.

“I've got a corn crop that will bring me nearly 500 barrels. I have mules and horses, to say nothing of the two hogs that weigh 400 pounds. I can have my own corn ground for meal, for all of us likes corn broad a heap better than we do biscuit. We have lots of chickens, too, and we feed them corn and then there is the fodder and the tops that we feed to the milch cow.

“We have a big family of our own and since my brother's wife died I have his son along with my own children. His boy is near on to twenty years old, and I give him a tobacco patch that made him almost a barn. I didn't count it along with mine when I talked to you.

“Every year I market sweet potatoes and often turnip salad. As for any other crop, Maria has been able to can tomatoes, corn, and fruits of such as we have here on the farm. I just don't know just what a man could do and how a man could get along with a family if they didn't have just such a wife as Maria is, for she sure has stuck and done all she could to get along.

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“I don't pay no attention to politics no more. I used to be a Democrat but now I hardly know what to call myself 'cause I ain't much of a New Dealer.

“I'm no church member. Maria is. She's been a member since she was a girl. I never felt much like I should be a church member, for when I look around me it seems that being a member don't chance a person much. And I never thought it was right to do anything if you don't exactly know you're right in doing it, so I never joined a church. I go with Maria when we can get off, but that ain't often 'cause we got so many children. Maria's one of them old-fashioned kind of mothers that wants to take the kids to church with us, and there's so many to wash and dress we just can't get there on time.

“We don't have no car on the place except Bronco's old '26 Ford. I ain't felt able to buy another for we need a new house here.

“I own the place. The land's right good and I make good crops, but I have to work mighty hard to give my family plenty to eat and clothes to wear. I've got near to 100 acres in this piece and another little tract close by just over the hill yonder. A poor man has to work all his life anyhow, but it's healthy.”

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